

## Making Mischief

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**Purple Noon**, adapted from *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and **Dennis Hopper** in *Wim Wenders's* unsettling *The American Friend*, from *Ripley's Game*. (We haven't heard the last from him, either—Anthony Minghella starts filming *The Talented Mr. Ripley* with Matt Damon next month.)

Along with the fiction features, the show includes **Philippe Kohly's** French-Swiss doc on Highsmith. It's ploddingly encumbered with ridiculous dramatized vignettes from the novels and shots of the writer just sitting there typing. Also a New York premiere: **Rainer Boldt's** *The Storyteller*, made in Germany in 1989, a murky black comedy saved by **Udo Schenck's** suave performance as lead rogue. Strikingly handsome, bright, and not-to-be-trusted-for-a-minute, he's the signature Highsmith hero.

—ELLIOTT STEIN

# First, Do Harm

## How Doctors Set the Stage for the Holocaust

BY MARK SCHOOFS

Israeli director Nitzan Aviram has made a Holocaust documentary, *Healing by Killing*, without a single Jewish survivor. He isn't being perverse. His movie, which opens next week at Film Forum, is about the key role doctors played in carrying out the Final Solution, so he focuses on their first victims: mentally and physically disabled Germans who were murdered in the vast "euthanasia" program that prefigured the death camps.

One survivor of the "mercy killings" tells how a group of children were told to strip before being gassed. "She describes the pile of clothes and shoes," says Aviram. "They're small piles, not the huge storage rooms you would get later, but it's the same thing."

When he was growing up, the 45-year-old Aviram heard stories of the Holocaust, and "I couldn't understand why there were so many doctors in places where people were getting killed," he says. "But the presence of a doctor was undeniable, like on the selection ramp," where physicians made instantaneous "diagnoses" of who should go directly to the gas.

Aviram's film relies heavily on Robert Jay Lifton, author of *The Nazi Doctors*, for background and on-screen

commentary. But even Lifton's readers will be newly horrified by, say, the nattily dressed former Auschwitz doctor Hans Munch, who tells the camera exactly how he certified that the gassed corpses were really dead.

Aviram started filming *Healing by Killing* in Germany and Austria, at the medical centers where the organized killing of the disabled began in the late 1930s. By the time he got to Auschwitz, at the end of his filming, "My reaction was a mixture of horror and understanding." Auschwitz was euthanasia on a grand scale. Doctors, who had a higher pro-

portion of Nazi Party members than any other profession, helped invent the gas chambers, the crematoria, and the selection ramps—all before the gates to the death camps opened.

The film traces the career of Dr. Irmfried Eberl, who ran the first medical killing center. He went on to play a central role in expanding the euthanasia campaign, which eventually slaughtered between 70,000 and 100,000 disabled people. In early 1941, healthy, nondisabled prisoners from concentration camps were sent to Eberl's medical slaying center. Physicians copied the prisoner lists onto patient lists, and killed the Jews and the Communists exactly as they had the handicapped. Shortly thereafter, Eberl became the first director of Treblinka.

"The Nazis were not great inventors," Aviram says. "But when they saw a system was available, they used it."

Doctors even gave the Final Solution its rationale: The Jews were a biological mistake, like the disabled.

Aviram is currently touring U.S. medical schools. The film "does something different for that audience," he says. "They know things we don't know"—such as how frequent, and how terrifyingly easy, unethical decisions are. In a recent postfilm discussion at the New York Academy of Medicine, Jeremiah Barondess, the academy's president, noted that in U.S. emergency rooms, blacks with bone fractures are much less likely to receive painkillers than whites. And "Do Not Resuscitate" orders are more common for blacks, women, and people who are incontinent.

Early in the film, a contemporary German medical student is asked if ethics should be taught in medical school. "I don't think so," he replies. "We already have so many subjects to study." The American medical students "laugh and identify with that part," says Aviram, but "the film is like shock treatment." Last week at Harvard, he says, the discussion centered on "how the emphasis in medicine is more on the science than on the humanity. There's something wrong with the balance."



A memorial plate in Bedburg-Hau, a psychiatric hospital that sent hundreds of patients to their deaths in 1940

## "Fascinating!"

— Jack Kroll, NEWSWEEK

WOODY ALLEN

WILD MAN BLUES

Barbara Kopple's *Wild Man Blues* is a documentary about the life and career of Woody Allen. It's a fascinating look at the man behind the movies, from his early days as a comedian to his current status as a filmmaker. The film is a must-see for anyone who loves Woody Allen.

"Extraordinary!"  
— ROLLING STONE

Meet Director Barbara Kopple  
at Barnes & Noble  
(Citicorp, 3rd Ave. & 54th St.)  
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Q&A moderated by  
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